What We Stand For

We meet regularly for political discussion and to organise our activities. The following is a brief description of our basic political principles:

- We are against all forms of capitalism: private, state and self-managed.

- We are for communism, which is a classless society in which all goods are distributed according to needs and desires.

- We are actively opposed to all ideologies which divide the working class, such as religion, sexism and racism.

- We are against all expressions of nationalism, including "national liberation" movements such as the IRA.

- The working class (wage labourers, the unemployed, housewives, etc.), is the revolutionary class; only its struggle can liberate humanity from scarcity, war and economic crisis.

- Trade unions are part of the capitalist system, selling our labour power to the bosses and sabotaging our struggles. We support independent working class struggle, in all areas of life under capitalism, outside the control of the trade unions and all political parties.

- We totally oppose all capitalist parties, including the Labour Party and other organisations of the capitalist left. We are against participation in fronts with these organisations.

- We are against participation in parliamentary elections; we are for the smashing of the capitalist state by the working class and the establishment of organisations of working class power.

- We are against sectarianism, and support principled co-operation among revolutionaries.

- We exist to actively participate in escalating the class war towards communism.

c1992

IRELAND
nationalism and imperialism
the myths exploded

Subversion

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Subversion

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Twenty Years on a Knife Edge

"... the fate of the province [Northern Ireland] is still, as it has been for so long, poised on a knife- edge between a slow climb back to some form of ordered existence or a swift plunge into unimaginable anarchy and civil war."[1]

These words - from the closing sentence of F S Lyons' book, Ireland Since the Famine - were published as long ago as 1973. Leaving aside the misuse of the term 'anarchy', it is a measure of how little seems to have changed in the two decades since, that a similar assessment is the commonplace conclusion to virtually every present -day commentary on Northern Ireland. Just about the only sign of movement in this bloody deadlock has been the remorselessly rising death toll. In 1972 it past what had been described as "the appalling figure" of 800. By 1982 more than 2000

"Troops Out"

As the bloodshed continues year after year, with no end in prospect, it is not surprising that opinion polls carried out in mainland Britain over the past 20 years have consistently shown between 50-60% in favour of a British military withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

The reasons why such a view is expressed are no doubt diverse. Britain's Irish Problem, or as some prefer, Ireland's British Problem, has a complex history stretching back for hundreds of years. Few people really understand "the Irish Question" and most have no answer to it except to wash their hands of the whole sordid mess. It the Irish want to shoot and bomb the hell out of each other, they say, why should we stand in their way - just get "our lads" out of there and let them get on with it.

1 F S Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, (revised edition, 1973), page 780

The best that can be said about such people is that at least they are not organised into political groups seeking to represent the interests of the interests, working class ..... which is more than can be said for a different element within the SO-ODS who want Britain to get out of Ireland. and whose views was mainly want to challenge in this pamphlet.

We are referring of course to the members and sympathisers of the left-wing groups who support "self-determination for the Irish people" and who would regard withdrawal from the "Six Counties" as a victory for the Irish people over British imperialism. Since "their self-determination" is those people who support the "Irish Republican struggle" as a whole, they tend to call the Irish people how to conduct their own nationally liberation struggle. If you oppose the British state and what it's doing in Northern Ireland, you must automatically give "unconditional support for republican resistance to any British action"; so say the Anarchist Workers Group).

In this way the left presents a mirror image of one of their own sectarians against the British state, while they completely ignore any challenge to British rule in Ireland is inherently related as support for the IRA and therefore subversive. It they themselves tend to see any criticism of the IRA as paralysing the actions of the British state and, therefore, as objectively for imperialism.

The way we see it, however, these "options" - to oppose the British state and support the IRA or to oppose the IRA and support the British state - are both wholly contained within the boundaries of capitalist politics. Instead of looking at the entire range of political and military groupings and especially those who are playing a leading role in the struggle, they encourage the working class to line up behind one whole spectrum. They encourage the workers to submit to the politics of the left, capitalist faction or another. This is one of the prime functions of the left which it performs as usefully (for capitalism) in relation to Northern Ireland as it does with regard to many other issues.

the British State ...

It's certainly not hard to grasp why the British state is regarded with such loathing in certain parts of Northern Ireland. For over twenty years the Catholic population has been on the sharp end of a repression which has been applied in many different ways, but mainly through the use of armed

...and its opponents

Although our argument is that the Republican struggle is not in itself a Radio 4, 24.2.1982, Ireland's Troubles Explained, The Guardian 24.2.1982, The World Tonight, BBC

horse and the legal system.

Can a military level this has involved the constant presence of as many as 30,000 men based out such bases as the Belfast and RUC, who at their most numerous numbered 14,000 men. Almost daily, January 1972, the British Army carried out "Bloody Sunday", shooting dead 13 unarmed people in Derry. Internment - imprisonment without trial - was introduced in August 1971 and by the end of the year 1,576 people had been interned, mostly Catholics. Internment was ended in December 1975, but Diplock courts (i.e. no jury) continued to operate. Diplock courts have been widely criticised by lawyers and civil liberties groups for their bias towards the prosecution. Between 1972 and 1982 there were 10,000 shootings and 3,500 explosions in Northern Ireland and over 2,000 people have been killed. Nearly 14,500 people in Northern Ireland are currently in prison convicted of "terrorist" offences.

The legal system has also played a vital role through the use of various forms of emergency legislation, which has included the power to detain suspects for seven days without charge, the removal of the right to silence, and the power to proscribe organisations. Over 2,000 people have been detained under the PTA, approximately 90% of whom were subsequently released without charge. Only 3% - 1,536 - have ever been convicted of terrorist offences. Of those only 679 were convicted on the basis of uncorroborated confessions obtained by physical violence during interrogation. Diplock courts have been widely criticised by lawyers and civil liberties groups for their bias towards the prosecution. In 1982 Amnesty International published a report which criticised the British government for its use of torture during interrogation. Despite the fact that the British Army has consistently denied the use of torture, there is little question that many suspects have been severely beaten up in the course of interrogation. Many have suffered permanent injuries as a result.

Of course, there's little question for any explanation of current courage by the IRA and its supporters about why this is the case. To claim, as they do, that there is a war going on in Northern Ireland, and then to criticise the British state for behaving just as any state would do faced with a war-time situation is ridiculous. It's like wanting to have your cake and eat it. Nevertheless, as we've said, this no-one-to-the Self-style state is based - and that mainly on the recruiting and of the Loyalist paramilitaries - on the back against it. The question is, though, by what means and to what end?

struggle for working class interests, there are certain things mixed up with it that we would support. Like, for example, the "Free Derry" "uprising" of August 1969, when the Catholic Bogsiders organised themselves to repel attacks by Protestant marchers and the police with stones, petrol bombs and burning barricades.

This is no different to the solidarity we have expressed in the past with the working class inhabitants of inner city areas in Britain such as Toxteth, Brixton or Tottenham, who, fed up with daily police harassment on the streets and with having their homes smashed up in raids for drugs or stolen property (the like of which is part-and-parcel of everyday life for thousands of working class people in Northern Ireland), they have erupted onto the streets and temporarily driven out the police.

We support such riots not because we think they are somehow inherently revolutionary, but for the basic reason that they show a spirit of rebellion alive within the working class and an unwillingness to put up with attacks on its conditions of living. A class which doesn't fight back against the hardships which are imposed on it is unlikely to ever rise up and overthrow its oppressors.

We are for the expulsion of all armed gangs from working class areas of Northern Ireland - be they the British army, the loyalist paramilitaries, or the IRA. However, the type of working class self-defence against state oppression and sectarian attacks which mainly took the form of rioting seems to have become less common in Northern Ireland.

On one side, the army and the RUC have been less willing to tolerate the existence of the semi-official barricaded "no-go areas" which were commonplace in the early years of the present day "Troubles". While on the other side, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA have been equally determined to keep as much resistance to the British state as possible under their control: "This is a special message for young people - no hijackings, no joy riding, no stone throwing at the Brits. If you want to do these things, there are organisations to do this for you." - Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein.4

This has an important consequence for the position we adopt towards events in Northern Ireland, because when groups like the RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party) state that "Workers who live in the imperialist heartland have a special duty to back those fighting against the British oppression"5, what this largely boils down to at the present time is that we should support the "armed struggle" being waged by the IRA and the other, smaller Republican groups.

4 quoted in Organise! no. 20, Aug - Nov 1990.

The Rise of the Provisional IRA

In our view the rise of the Provisional IRA represented a tragic step back for the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Civil Rights Association in Northern Ireland was agitating for an end to discrimination against Catholics. At the origins of the civil rights movement lay genuine working class concerns over issues such as housing and unemployment. If these issues had been taken up on the basis of fighting for working class needs, there would have been a chance of uniting Catholic and Protestant workers, since all workers have a material interest in struggling for better housing and higher wages.

However, rather than fighting for more and better resources, which could have achieved real material improvements in conditions for all working class people, the Civil Rights Association's campaign to establish the so-called rights of a persecuted minority within civil society amounted to merely demanding a more equitable sharing out of the miserable resources which already existed. This movement was, moreover, deeply imbued with liberal illusions about achieving "equality" and "justice" - in a system which by its very nature cannot do anything but generate inequality and injustice.

The direction of this movement was driven even further away from its origins by the reaction of the Northern Ireland Unionists, who regarded the civil rights campaign as a threat to their "privileged" position. Northern Ireland was certainly no paradise for working class Protestants. Their "privileges" didn't amount to much more than having a slightly less shitty slum to live in or a slightly less miserably paid job to go to than their Catholic neighbours. As the Dublin based anarchist Workers Solidarity Movement puts it, "The reality of Orange bigotry is one of 2 1/2p looking down on 2p."6 Nonetheless, the civil rights movement's demand that Catholics should have equal access to jobs and housing previously reserved for Protestants

5 "What We Fight For", the next step, 16.6.1989

6 "Getting To Grips With Sinn Fein's Socialism" workers solidarity no. 25, Summer 1988 reprinted in Workers' Solidarity Movement, Northern Ireland and British Imperialism

Revolutionary Potential?

In a relatively short space of time, therefore, the rebellion of the Northern Ireland Unionists and the British army absorbed a movement with its origins in working class grievances and reformist demands, and reinvented in its stead, among a section of the population which throughout the 1960s had shown little explicit interest in wider constitutional issues such as partition, a military campaign for the political and of uniting Ireland.

What this says to us is that the Provisional IRA did not develop organically out of the struggles of the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland. Any more than, say, the Labour Party or the trade unions are a direct outgrowth of the current struggles of the working class in Britain.

We can we point this out one response we get is that we show of will support the armed struggle, even though it is controlled by the IRA. In the same way that we support strikes, even though they may be controlled by the trade unions. Or as some who write to Class War about this issue put it: "So what if the IRA dolonds a Catholic, nationalist community? Would you attack strikers if they supported the Labour Party?"

In fact this analogy only strengthens our case against supporting the armed struggle in Northern Ireland. The basic motivation of workers who join a trade union or Free Labour Party is that it will fight for working class interests may the actions of actions is not. Yet a strike organised by a trade union and involving workers who support the Labour Party does have the potential to go beyond these limits and bring

Although in recent years Sinn Fein and the IRA have fought a well-prepared campaign with the best paper in one hand and an Armalite in the other, the IRA came together as a purely military organisation. It was the Official IRA, from which they had split during 1969-70, the Provos had no interest whatsoever in the sort of reforms demanded by the Civil Rights movement, since the Provos' aim was not to modify the Northern Ireland state but to get rid of it. At first even the Stalinists of the Official IRA were denounced as too left-wing by the Provos - though when the Provisionals came to write their own programme after the split (published as **Eire Nua** in 1972), they actually based it on an old document that the Stalinist Coughlan in a Official IRA member Anthony Coughlan had written before the split.[7]

was perceived by Protestant workers as something that would undermine their own already precarious standard of living. It was not hard to stir up Protestant fears of a Catholic takeover of Northern Ireland, for example, as the Catholic population was growing faster than the Protestant population, and on the basis of the 1961 census it was clear that by the end of the century Catholics would outnumber Protestants by any call for an end to discrimination.

Protestant working class hostility towards the civil rights movement was of course fostered by the Northern Ireland ruling class. Ever since the establishment of the Unionist ruling class had been dominated by a mixture of aggressive nationalism and appeals to Protestant solidarity. In order to pursue its own - sectional interests against those of the working class, the ruling class had to whip up fears of a Catholic takeover. The Protestant working class in the Northern Ireland economy was concentrated in the shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries, which were dependent on the British market. Any threat to the link with Britain was therefore a threat to their livelihood. Similarly, in order to destroy working class unity, the ruling class had to organise pogroms against Catholic workers and their homes.

Whenever Catholic and Protestant workers got together to struggle against their common employers, the ruling class was always quick to whip up renewed sectarian hostility. In order to destroy working class unity, the Orange Relief Fund was set up by Protestant employers to assist workers who had been thrown out of work by the 1920-22 civil disturbances. The Fund was controlled by the Orange Order and the Unionist Party. In 1932, for example, when the unemployed of the Belfast shipyards and engineering works united in a hunger march, the Fund refused to help any of the strikers. Instead, it only helped those who had been "loyal" to the employers during the strike.

In the late 1920s, in the Northern Ireland ruling class launched a campaign to drive Catholics out of the shipyards, where they were employed in large numbers. Within a few years, 8,000 workers, or about one quarter of the labour force, had been driven out of their jobs. Of these, 7,000 were Catholics and 1,000 Protestants who had been associated with the labour movement. Similarly, in the 1930s, the Unionist Party refused to allow Catholics to join the Special Constabulary, which was used to break strikes and intimidate the working class. Only 2% of the Specials were Catholics, and they were mainly recruited from the Protestant areas of Belfast.

I was against this background that the Civil Rights Association was formed. Its peaceful protests were thoroughly met with violence by the RUC and the Unionist Party. The IRA did nothing to fight these attacks. Instead, it began its own campaign of sectarian murder. Initially Catholics had to organise self-defence - as they did, for example, at the Battle of the Falls in August 1969. In these circumstances it was inevitable that the IRA emerged. Increasingly Catholics turned to the IRA for protection. First of all against sectarian attacks, and later on against the British army.

"My Enemy's Enemy Is My Friend"

We don't shed any tears for the police attacks and political assassination killed by the IRA. Our only regret on seeing someone like Ivor Bean, Tabbit Duo or Tim Dillons or the Grand Hotel in Brighton after the IRA bombed the Tory Conservative Party conference was that he was still alive. But this doesn't mean that we automatically share a common cause with anyone and everyone who opposes the Brits in any slightly peculiar unselfish way. We don't judge the class nature of a struggle simply by the people it attracts. We must also take into account the purposes and intent behind such actions.

As communists we oppose the state because it is the instrument the capitalist class uses to enforce its domination over the working class. In overthrowing capitalism the working class will smash the state and establish its own democratic rule. Only the Republican movement's opposition to the Belfast state is not founded on this base. It seeks simply a new state with a new flag to replace the existing one. Its leading figures have made it clear that they want no part in any revolution over the whole of the island. This new state would be as much an enemy of the working class as the present one.

The outcome of past historical liberation struggles, even those that have always ended up being interpreted just as much by its so-called ideologists as it was by the participants. IRA supporters like the POUM and the Spanish Civil War, by the movements such as the ANC and the PLO, as soon as they simply re-enforce political power. Yesterday's freedom fighters are everywhere today running countries such as Ireland, Israel, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. Many of these have become the most vicious exploiters of the working class and oppressors of other nationalities.

What is wrong with Irish working class people struggling among themselves with guns, bombs and bullets is that it is not a struggle against capitalism. Civil War, by the Communists who, until after 1922, supported Dublin's Provisional Government against the Irish Republican Army, was a struggle between two sections of the capitalist class. Both sides were equally reactionary. Neither side was fighting for socialism. Neither side was fighting for the working class. Both sides were fighting for capitalism.

The Irish Republican Army is a nationalist organisation. Its stated aim is to establish a United Ireland. Its methods are military. Its means are violence. Its members are drawn from the Irish working class and its activities are directed against the British ruling class. Its members are prepared to kill and be killed in pursuit of their objectives. Its volunteers are subjected to military discipline. Its actions are designed to bring about the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland. Its ultimate objective is the establishment of a United Ireland.

Because workers are prevented from participating in the political life of the country, because they are denied the right to form political parties to express their own class interests, because they are not allowed to have their own newspapers, because they are not allowed to hold meetings or demonstrations, because they are not allowed to picket factories, offices and workplaces, because they are not allowed to withhold their labour, because they are not allowed to take solidarity action, because they are not allowed to take political strike action, because they are not allowed to engage in secondary picketing, because they are not allowed to take any form of direct action against the employers, because they are prevented from taking any form of political action, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which represents their class interests, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the use of troops in Ireland, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes internment, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Prevention of Terrorism Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes strip searching, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Criminal Evidence Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Public Order Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Criminal Justice Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Emergency Powers Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1991, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1998, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 2000, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 2001, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 2002, because they are denied the right to vote for a party which opposes the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act

The Myth of National Self-Determination

Many of the left-wing groups who argue for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland do so because they believe in the principle of "national self-determination" in opposition to imperialism. The RCP, in the "What We Fight For" statement which appeared in every issue of its newspaper, the next step, declares that it supports "Irish self-determination". The slogan of the Troops Out Movement (TOM) is "self-determination for the Irish people as a whole". The Troops Out Movement defines "self-determination" as the "right of people within a nation to determine their own political, social and economic affairs free from external control".10

By promoting this so-called "right" left wing groups such as the RCP and TOM give credence to two dangerous myths

First, to speak of "the nation" or "the people" as if these are homogeneous entities flies in the face of the reality that capitalist society is divided into mutually antagonistic classes. "The people as a whole" have never determined their own "political, social and economic affairs". In every country, politics, social and economic policies are drawn up by, and in the interests of, the ruling class. What is presented as being for the good of the nation is purely for the benefit of the bosses. Any ideology which denies this is so, is a barrier which must be broken down if the working class is to assert its own independent class interests.

Even the titles of TOM's own publications - such as In Whose Name? and Without Consent - with their central argument that "Britain is pursuing a war in Ireland without a political mandate to do so from its own people"11 tell us that the object which TOM seeks to win for Ireland doesn't even exist in Britain. By agitating for the "right of self-determination" TOM encourages workers to waste their efforts in chasing something which cannot be achieved.

Secondly, it is an illusion to suggest that a nation such as Ireland - or to be more precise, the ruling class within a united Ireland - could determine its affairs "free from external control". The rulers of any newly "independent" nation-state immediately find themselves having to come to terms with a

10 Troops Out Movement, In Whose Name? Britain's denial of peace in Ireland, page 5

11 ibid, page 29.

world-wide economic system dominated by powerful blocs and integrated on a global scale. Their room for manoeuvre within this framework is extremely limited.

In the twentieth century the typical outcome of national liberation struggles has been one or other of two scenarios. Either the imperialist power relinquishes direct political control but continues to exert its domination at an economic level; or the client state frees itself entirely from the domination of one imperialist bloc only by switching to the all-embracing grip of a rival bloc. In neither of these instances does even a "successful" national liberation struggle result in any real independence for the local capitalists; nor is there any weakening of imperialism as a whole.

The Irish "Free" State

Any supporter of "Irish self-determination" who believes that "national liberation" is possible in any meaningful sense within modern capitalism should look at the history of the south of Ireland since it achieved "independence" in 1922.

The separation of the Irish Free State from the rest of Britain did nothing to alter the two states' economic relationship, in which Ireland exported agricultural produce to Britain, and Britain sold manufactured goods to Ireland. At no time before the Second World War did Ireland send less than 90% of its total exports to British markets. And, as the south was so dependent on "free trade", it could not risk placing the sorts of tariffs on imported manufactured goods which might have encouraged growth in its own fledgling industrial sector.

In the early 1930s de Valera's Fianna Fail party came to power determined to free Ireland from British domination through a policy of economic nationalism. They believed that Ireland could become "a self-contained unit, providing all the necessities of living in adequate quantities for the people residing in this island at the moment and probably for a much larger number".12

Predictably, however, the protectionist policies which were implemented in pursuit of this drew retaliation from the south's economic competitors. It didn't help either that the policy of economic nationalism was set in motion in the midst of a global economic depression. The gap between the cost of

12 Sean Lemass, quoted in F S Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, page 610

mouths and the income earned from exports widened greatly to Ireland's disadvantage. This constant trade deficit drained the nation's foreign currency reserves which further weakened Irish capital's standing in the world market. Also, even extensive state intervention in the economy, intended to stimulate Irish owned domestic manufacturing, could not provide sufficient capital to build up industries capable of competing against Ireland's far more advanced rivals on the world market.

Between 1921-39 the average income per head in Ireland dropped from nearly two thirds of what it was in Britain to just under half. "The Irish people" showed just how much say they had in "determining their own affairs" by deserting "their nation" in droves: more than 300,000 people emigrated during the period 1936-51, followed by a further 400,000 over the next ten years to 1961. It was only this massive export of 'surplus' population which kept standards of living for those who stayed behind from declining even more steeply.

By the late 1950s the dream of economic self- sufficiency had been exposed as an unattainable illusion. Protectionist policies were abandoned and the south set about wooing investment by foreign capital. Ever since then, as had been the case beforehand too, the south of Ireland has been completely bound up with the fortunes of the world market, and no more able to escape from the inevitable booms and slumps of the global economy than any other nation state.

The Policies of Sinn Fein

We would be stretching our argument beyond credibility, however, if we gave the impression that the supporters of a united Ireland are fine idealists whose best intentions would sadly be frustrated by the economic dictates of world capitalism. Of course Sinn Fein and the IRA say (as every other national liberation movement has said - before coming to power) that the working class would be better off in its "Thirty Two County Socialist Republic". But whereas for us socialism means the complete abolition of money, wage labour, the market system and the state, Sinn Fein's so-called "socialism" amounts to nothing more than a mixture of state capitalism and self managed (i.e. self-exploited) agricultural co-operatives which has never been of any benefit to the working class whenever or wherever such measures have been implemented in the past.

If Sinn Fein's economic programme leaves everything to be desired, its stance on many social issues is equally unattractive. In February 1992, amidst all furore which followed the Irish Attorney General's initial decision to prevent a 14 year old rape victim from travelling to England to have an abortion, Sinn Fein's annual conference endorsed a women's policy document which stated: "We accept the need for abortion only where a woman's life is at risk or in grave danger."13

"Popular Justice"

It's not just the long-term aims the IRA is fighting for which make it an enemy of the working class. There's also the IRA's present-day role in policing Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

According to an article which appeared in the Guardian on 22 October 1990, the IRA had so far that year carried out 89 punishment shootings (a bullet in the ankles, knees, wrists or the base of the spine) and 55 beatings (prolonged assaults with iron bars or baseball bats producing multiple injuries). In addition it had also ordered another 20 or 30 "offenders" to get out of Northern Ireland - or else face the consequences. Since then "expulsion orders" have been on the increase and by February 1992 they were said to be running at 3 a week (i.e. 150 a year).14

Recently the IRA has also developed less thuggish ways of policing the Catholic communities, such as manipulating the courts and social services into administering what are in effect custodial sentences. Youths who it has been made clear are under threat of punishment by the IRA are given "place of safety" orders by the magistrates courts for their own protection and have to serve their time in young offenders centres until the IRA decides that it is safe for them to return to their home.15

We ourselves see nothing wrong with working class communities organising themselves to take direct action against anti-social elements such as drug pushers or burglars who rob from working class people's houses. Some of the "petty criminals" dealt with by the IRA may well fall into this category and deserve some sort of punishment - then again, you could say the same about some of the people punished by the ruling class's legal system. The point is that a lot of them don't deserve it. There's nothing necessarily "anti-social" about, for example, people who steal from shops - yet they too fall foul of the swift, brutal, self-appointed policing of the IRA.

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13 Independent 24.2.92

14 Observer 23.2.92

15 Observer 29.2.92; New Statesman and Society 28.2.92.

Many of the victims of IRA punishments are joyriders. The police are reluctant to respond to reports of stolen vehicles for fear of IRA ambushes and booby trap bombs. The IRA steps into this vacuum and takes action against joyriders under the guise of 'reluctantly responding to community pressure'.16 In this way the IRA takes credit for clearing up a mess which it has largely continued to creating in the first place!

Once again though we must look not at the IRA's targets so much as it's reasons for attacking them. The IRA's main reason for carrying out punishments is to reinforce its rule over the territory it controls. People are encouraged to contact the "Republican movement" if they are concerned about crime, rather than calling the police (or doing something about it themselves). The less the RUC enters the Catholic ghettos, the better the IRA likes it, since it gives their members greater freedom to go about their activities. Anyone who, even inadvertently, fouls up an IRA operation by calling the police into a Catholic area instantly turns themselves into an informer and faces the ultimate penalty: death.

The IRA's so-called "popular justice" may be an alternative within the Catholic communities to the policing carried out by the RUC, but only in the same sense that the Labour Party is an alternative to the Tories: it is not qualitatively different. The conclusion - that there is nothing to choose between being policed by the IRA or by the RUC - is one that has been voiced within the Catholic community itself: "When you have Sinn Fein and the IRA talking about human rights abuses in the likes of Castlereagh [the RUC interrogation centre], its sickening for them to dish out summary so-called justice like this."17

We might also point out that at the same time as it is going around crippling petty thieves and teenage joyriders, the IRA itself is raising funds through all sorts of rackets which, far from being petty, net it an income amounting, according to one estimate, to around £10 million a year.18 But then again the whole of capitalism is based on robbery, it's just that the ruling class decides what sorts are legal and what sorts are not.

16 Alex Maskey, Sinn Fein member of Belfast City Council, quoted in the Guardian 22.10.1990

17 Henry Robinson of Families Against Intimidation and Terror, quoted in the Guardian 2.1.92

18 Guardian October 1990

The Future

While both the IRA's present actions and the goals it is fighting for mark it out in our eyes as an anti-working class organisation, speculation about what a united Ireland governed by Sinn Fein would be like is largely academic - because it's highly unlikely to come about. Although high-ranking British military officers have admitted on many occasions that they are never likely to be able to wipe out the IRA completely, the British state can still just about manage to sustain the political, social and economic costs of containing the impact of the "Troubles" at a tolerable level.

There is no way that any Dublin government could cope in the same way with 900 000 hostile Protestants in the north of a united Ireland. Even the IRA doesn't expect that the Protestants would integrate themselves happily into a 32 County Republic, and has to concede lamely that "They are a tiny national minority who must be given guarantees within any united Ireland"19 - which is about as plausible as arguing that if the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland was given "guarantees" by the British state the IRA would agree to the continuation of British rule in the north. This is the main reason, then, why British troops remain in Northern Ireland: to prevent an escalation of the "Troubles" which would plunge Ireland into chaos, thus threatening NATO's strategic interests and British, U.S. and EEC economic interests.

So, we do not foresee any change in the constitutional set-up in Northern Ireland in the near future. Nor are there many signs - at the moment - of any resurgence in the currently very low level of the class struggle there. The two communities, Catholic and Protestant - seem to be pitted against each other every bit as much as the ruling class wants them to be, since there is every advantage for British capitalists in maintaining the policy of 'divide and rule' which keeps workers' living standards in Northern Ireland so much lower than in the rest of Britain.

This isn't to say that these divisions couldn't be overcome in the course of massive class struggle, but where this mass struggle will come from is hard to foresee. At present, the fear once expressed by some members of the ruling class, that "If we lose in Belfast, we may have to fight in Brixton or Birmingham"20 - in other words, that the struggle in Northern Ireland could be the spark which ignites the flames of insurrection on the mainland - seems less well-founded than the prospect of a working class revolution

19 IRA spokesman quoted in the Observer 2.2.92.

20 John Biggs-Davidson, quoted in R Faligot The Kitson Experiment (1983)

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which spreads from the Republic, British and the rest of Europe. But this doesn't mean that the prospects for the class struggle in Northern Ireland can be written off. The inherent instability and unpredictability of capitalism and the impossibility of eradicating the class struggle altogether means that we can never predict for certain where or when the next upsurge in working class struggle will occur.

Until this happens, no doubt the war in Northern Ireland will drag on. But we should be in no doubt about what sort of war it is. The fact that thousands of Protestant workers have sided with the British state and its Loyalist paramilitary appendages or that thousands of Catholic workers give their support to Sinn Fein and the IRA does not alter the capitalist nature of the conflict. The ruling class - or those who aspire to become the ruling class - have always been able to hope the working class into fighting their battles for them. Our attitude to the situation in Northern Ireland may not find much of an echo among workers there at present, but for genuine revolutionaries there can be no alternative to calling for **a united working class struggle against both sides!**

Printed and published by **Subversion. Dept. 10, 1 Newton St, Manchester M1 1HW**

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